

NUTRITIONAL HAZARDS OF FOOD TABOOS IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

I. ONYESOM

Department of Medical Biochemistry, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Food shortages and nutritional deficiencies are not uncommon in most developing nations including Nigeria, and these appear to be worsen by cultural food prejudice, practices, taboos and beliefs. Common food taboos affect the nutrient (especially protein) intake by children and so, suffer most. Food taboos should be discouraged because there are no sound justifications for such cultural practices, and children should be allowed to have adequate nutrition for the maintenance of health, growth, and proper development. The lay public should be educated in order to persuade them to have changing attitudes that will enhance children's adequate nutrition and keep them healthy "today" for "tomorrow's" hope.

KEYWORDS: Food taboo, protein, malnutrition, poverty, egg, cereals

INTRODUCTION: Nothing on earth is more important to our survival than the air we breathe, the water we drink, and of course, the food we eat. Diet is the food usually eaten by a person or community, and it is balanced when it contains the necessary nutrients, needed to support growth and prevent deficiency syndromes. Sound nutrition therefore, depends on a proper dietary regimen, which must include the six major components: carbohydrates, proteins, lipids, vitamins, minerals, and water in the right proportion. Montgomery, *et al.* (1977) defined nutrition as the science that interprets the relationship of food to the functioning of living organism, and its assessment involves making an inventory of an individuals food assets and liabilities. The techniques used to assemble such inventory have been developed.

DIET COMPONENTS AND PROTEIN REQUIREMENTS: An adequate diet should then, provide all the necessary nutrients in amounts needed by the body for optimum health. And in order to maintain the equilibrium state of health, the total body requirements must be supplied to satisfy the demands for energy and tissue maintenance. Optimum growth and development in childhood requires good nutrition, health protection and additional proteins. Protein rich food is therefore pivotal to children's good health.

Proteins are biopolymers composed of monomeric units called amino acids. Twenty or so, are biologically important, out of which only nine are essential because they cannot be synthesized by the body. This essentiality forms the basis for classification of proteins into (a) First class proteins, which contain most of the essential amino acids, and are usually obtained from animal sources such as eggs, milk, lean meat, etc, and (b) Second class proteins, which contain few of the essential amino acids, and are mostly proteins obtained from some plant sources. Pulse is a group of plant food rich in proteins. Proteins are denatured by such means as cooling, frying or boiling and heating. Denaturation processes do not alter the nutritional quality of proteins.

Functions of dietary proteins: The carbon and nitrogens atoms of the amino acid constituents of dietary proteins are used for the biosynthesis of several nitrogen-containing components of the cell. An example includes active amines like neurotransmitters, which relate information from tissues to the brain. Proteins promote growth, repair damaged tissues and replace the worn-out ones. During dietary deficits, the carbon skeleton of their amino acids could be metabolized to yield energy.

Proteins, unlike carbohydrates and lipids (fats and oils) cannot be stored by the body. Excesses are converted to urea and excreted through urine. Paradoxically, intake is scarcely sufficient. Dietary proteins deficiency thus, is the most serious nutritional problem in the world. While it has devastating effects in under-developed countries, such deficiency is not uncommon even in developed countries. Proteins deficiency is particularly observed in pregnancy,

and lactating women, the poor, the aged, and those who habitually avoid foods rich in proteins, and in fact, the children, especially in regions where strong food taboos exist (Omololu, 1972). It is therefore, necessary to eat sufficient protein-containing foods of adequate biologic value.

Available statistics indicate poor protein intake by most children in the “Third World”. Several factors, including: ignorance, poverty, and food taboos have been implicated.

Common Food taboos and Effect on Children’s Health: In Southern Nigeria, especially around the Mid-Western Region, it has been observed that meat and eggs are not given to children because parents believe that it will make them steal. They argue that meat and eggs are expensive, and if children are reared on expensive foods they will grow and acquire expensive food habits, which they cannot afford unless they steal (Ogbeide, 1974).

Milk, whether from cow or coconut, and liver (meat) must not be given to children, because it is believed that cow milk will make them behave like cows later in life, and that coconut milk renders them unintelligent whereas, the liver causes abscesses in their livers.

Gizzards and thighs (lap) of chicken are strictly eaten by the elderly people. The children can only have the lower limbs, wrings and at times the head. In some regions, women and children are forbidden from eating nutritious parts like liver, kidney, breast, testis, etc of animals thus, denying them essential dietary proteins contained in these various meat items.

Generally, men always have their share of the family food first and the women and children last. This means that the best part of any meal is always for the men. In some places beans and vegetable are not taken because they are believed to cause gastric (stomach) disorder.

It is disheartening to say that in some homes, there have been wars among the children usually after meal over who gets the head and/or bone of fishes used for cooking. Some parents share these parts “turn after turn” among their children to prevent heated debates, arguments, quarrels and fighting, leaving the flesh for themselves. If any child dares challenges, they will sharply rebuke the child saying “na food dey belle full, no bi fish or meat, abi you wan tief”. They are only interested in quantity rather than quality. For another set of parents, you must indicate your interest for the head and bones of fish prior to the meal. The first to declare such interest gets it. No wonder utterances like: “mummy, mummy, na me get head and bone of today’s fish ooh” has become a celebrated aphorism among children. It is however, sad to note that these food taboos primarily affect foods of animal origin which contain approximately 18% protein, and is of course, the most valuable source of proteins with high biological value (Davidson, *et al.*, 1986).

Children tissues are labile and can develop dehydration and other deficiencies all too readily, thus they have higher protein demands and slender reserves. Their denial of such dietary proteins could lead to depletion of the body’s protein and consequently, the ability to maintain body tissues and sustain growth is lost. This causes protein energy malnutrition characterized by marasmic-kwashiokor. Due to the variation in nutritional requirements, feeding practices and patterns, the various states of malnutrition have characteristic age distribution (Omololu, 1972).

Suggestions: The irking problems caused by food taboos should be broken by encouraging children to eat meat, eggs, milk, fish, etc since children need additional proteins to sustain growth, maintain body tissues and develop properly.

Inexpensive balanced diets are common and should be prepared and eaten. For example, lysine and tryptophan are two important amino acids indispensable to the growth of children, and are present in cowpea and cereals, respectively. Therefore, cooking legumes e.g. beans and cereals e.g. maize or rice together and serving same to children could improve their protein intake. Soya beans consumption in its various prepared forms is recommended since it is a rich source of plant protein. Fruits, nuts and vegetables should be eaten as vitamin sources. They lay public should be educated on the nutritional hazards of food taboos and the dangers of eating poor protein diets. Give children adequate food and keep them healthy “today” for “tomorrow’s” hope.

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Corresponding Author:

Onyesom, I.

Department of Medical Biochemistry, Delta State University, Abraka.

Postal: P.O. Box 144, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

E-mail: onyesominno@yahoo.co.uk

Mobile Tel: +234 803 052 8016